'Re-Using' Qualitative Data: on the Merits of an Investigative Epistemology

by Jennifer Mason
University of Manchester

Sociological Research Online, Volume 12, Issue 3,
< http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/3.html>
doi:10.5153/sro.1507

Received: 10 Jan 2007 Accepted: 21 Mar 2007 Published: 30 May 2007

Abstract

This article is written to accompany and respond to the articles that form the special issue of Sociological Research Online on 'Re-using qualitative data'. It argues that the articles are a welcome contribution, because they help to move the debate beyond moralistic and polarised positions, to demonstrate instead what sociologists can achieve by 're-using' qualitative data. The article argues for an investigative epistemology and investigative practices to guide qualitative data use and 're-use', and suggests that this is particularly important in the current social research climate.

Keywords: Qualitative Research / Re-Using Qualitative Data / Secondary Analysis / Investigative Epistemology

---

Introduction

1.1 There has been a rumbling debate for more than a decade about whether or not social scientists should engage in the re-use or secondary analysis of qualitative data (eg Corti et al, 1995; Hammersley, 1997, 2004; Mauthner, et al, 1998; Parry and Mauthner, 2004[1]). Whilst few of the proponents would support such a position, one consequence of the debate is a culture of uneasy suspicion that there might be something ethically, morally or epistemologically dubious about ‘re-using’ qualitative data.

1.2 In caricature, the debate polarises on the one hand a position that says that qualitative data are special and cannot be re-used by others on epistemological or ethical grounds, and on the other a pragmatic or instrumental position that says that data should be open for use by others, not least because they are expensive to produce. Furthermore, there is sometimes an implication that researchers who are unwilling to share their data are reactionary, selfish or defensive. This moralistic polarisation belies the more complex and nuanced arguments that are genuinely part of the debate, and that are certainly part of the enterprise of qualitative research, but the caricature has a resonance and impact nonetheless. This can lead to rigid, static and formulaic epistemological thinking about what is good or bad (pure or impure) data, or why certain types of data can or cannot be used, as though the answer to that question is always the same if data are being ‘re-used’ and as though that were the most important question to be debating in the first place.

1.3 What is particularly refreshing and useful about the articles contained in this special issue is the way that they push past the more moralistic overtones of the ‘re-use’ debate to focus instead on what happens, what is involved, what can and cannot be achieved, when sociologists get on and do it. In the process the articles give grounded and finely grained insights into the challenges but also the potential for qualitative ‘secondary’ analysis. In their different ways, the articles are qualitatively analytical about ‘re-use’ and they are engagingly reflexive in their arguments. They make the case for using *any* qualitative data carefully, revealingly, and reflexively, rather than arguing that a specific set of rules applies to so-called data re-use. Indeed, Moore’s deconstruction of the use/re-use, primary/secondary distinctions feels like a breath of common-sense fresh air that makes blanket objections to the ‘re-use’ as opposed to the ‘use’ of qualitative data look faintly ridiculous. In the face of a considered and nuanced study like Savage’s ‘Mass Observation’ analysis of social change and social class identities, is it really possible to sustain a reasoned argument that such an analysis is epistemologically dubious?

1.4 What is particularly important about these papers is that they champion the idea of an *investigative epistemology,* because they demonstrate the value in encouraging qualitatively inclined researchers to be purposefully investigative with and about data, and to be creative and interpretive in what they make from

them. They remind us that good qualitative research can be about energetically and creatively seeking out a range of data sources to answer pressing research questions in quite distinctive ways, as well as about using those sources critically and reflexively. This is an important counterbalance to arguments that we need to be highly guarded or even disdainful about the possibilities of data 're-use'. Furthermore, I want to suggest that this reminder that qualitative research is about investigation as well as a range of ways of 'knowing' the social world, is particularly important in the current social research climate.

Contemporary contexts

2.1 Being investigative with and about data implies being greedy, or perhaps we should say hungry, for data and there are a number of reasons why a data-greedy approach is important for qualitative research in the current climate. The most important of these is that qualitative research offers a distinctive order of knowledge that social science needs if it is going to offer meaningful understandings of the social world. Although qualitative research is rarely used to document widespread societal patterns, its capacity to understand social processes and social change for example, through illuminating how and why processes work in particular contexts, gives it a powerful and distinctive explanatory edge. Its capacity to cope with and make sociological sense of ambiguity, messiness, and ordinary complexities, rather than requiring that data be sanitised and standardised before they can be analysed, means that arguments based on qualitative research can be uniquely nuanced as well as highly compelling.

2.2 If the distinctive nature and value of qualitative data is one reason why researchers should seek them out greedily, then the current funding context and politics of research is another. Savage points to the extraordinary dominance of quantitative social survey methods in analyses of social change, despite the fact that there are certain kinds of understanding that survey data are unable to yield. Indeed, in the UK context there is a large and varied suite of national social surveys fuelling a major data production enterprise and infrastructure that has a long history and a reasonably secure future, especially given the level and commitment of Research Council support that it receives. This undoubtedly puts the UK in a strong international position in relation to the regular and reliable generation of good quality comprehensive social survey data, and indeed the Economic and Social Research Council's mission over recent years under the leadership of its Chief Executive, Ian Diamond, has been very explicitly to build, develop and promote 'data' and 'capacity' as the key social science resources (Economic and Social Research Council, 2005).

2.3 There is a danger though in this context that qualitative resources and data come to be seen as the poor relation to quantitative survey data, and certainly they continue to attract relatively speaking only a small proportion of the available funds. However, the recent UK funding context has shown that there are opportunities to enhance the qualitative research enterprise. For example, the ESRC, as well as other major research funders in the UK, has acknowledged the distinctive value of qualitative research, not only by continuing to fund qualitative and mixed method research grant applications and Research Centres, but also through special initiatives like its Research Methods Programme and its National Centre for Research Methods, both of which have contained strong qualitative strands. Most notably perhaps, in 2005 following a review of 'Qualitative Resources', ESRC established a 'Qualitative Data Programme', which has involved two initiatives. One was a small scheme of demonstrator projects entitled the 'Qualitative Archiving and Data Sharing Scheme', which ran between 2005-6 (see http://quads.esds.ac.uk), and the second is a major qualitative longitudinal research network due to start in 2007.

2.4 The QUADS scheme, although relatively modestly funded, is particularly significant in the context of discussions of qualitative data re-use, because its aim was precisely to explore how qualitative data could be archived and shared in ways sensitive to their distinctive nature and the particular relations of their production. The point was to harness the creative energies and talents of qualitative researchers in working out how to do this, rather than in railing against the very idea, and this seems to me to be in line with the spirit of the contributions to this special issue. In funding this, ESRC was acknowledging that these issues were complex, that qualitative data were valuable yet different from social survey data in crucial respects in relation to re-use, and that a number of models might need to be developed alongside the clearing house/portal model of archiving that Qualidata has pioneered, and which ESRC already supports.

2.5 However, resources do not get allocated to qualitative research without arguments being made for it, without some championing of the cause, and without ambitious and creative ideas and proposals both for individual projects as well as for how national or regional funding priorities and strategies should develop. Indeed, that is how Qualidata itself emerged. Struggles for resources and for recognition for qualitative work, alongside the momentum and influence of the established quantitative surveys and survey methodology, are part of the political economy of social research. In this context, to expend creative energies in hostility to qualitative data use or re-use is to score an own goal. Those energies might instead be applied to new opportunities and innovative ways of developing and using qualitative data investigatively.

2.6 Finally, there is another aspect of the current socio-cultural context that makes it particularly important that social researchers engage greedily and creatively with qualitative data, and that is to do with the extent to which research and data have become popularised, or we might even say commodified. There are myriad examples that could be cited here, including the blossoming of all kinds of digital online data archives, reality TV shows, TV social experiments like 'Wife Swap'. But perhaps one of the most significant is the invention and explosion of the practice of 'blogging' and the upsurge in the posting of all kinds of material on personal websites, through which people effectively generate and display or share personal data. There are also from time to time structured attempts to initiate or 'harvest' data from blogging, for example in the UK the invitation for anyone to take part in a mass blog called 'One Day in History' on 17th October 2006 (http://www.historymatters.org.uk/output/page96.asp).

2.7 In the face of what we might see as a cultural shift towards a popularised research culture and to the public display and sharing of personal data and information, it is particularly important that qualitative social researchers are leaders rather than laggards in helping to think through what are the methodological possibilities, and the challenges, of using and 're-using' new forms of data and new modes of data creation.

Investigative practices

3.1 The articles in this special edition speak in depth and complexity about the use of investigative practices on data, whether those data were generated by oneself or others, and they draw on contemporary and historical examples. Bishop and Savage show how researchers can formulate research questions both to take into, but also that derive from, the analysis of archived qualitative data, and that in the tradition of good investigative qualitative sociology these will include asking historical and socio-cultural questions about what the data can speak of or 'reveal' and how they can do this. These kinds of interpretive readings of qualitative data are core elements in investigative qualitative analytical practice, whether or not it is considered that data are being used or 're-used'. What is particularly interesting here though is to consider what is added by the analytical distance that is achieved both in the passage of time between the initial data collection and the 're-analysis', and also in the fact that the re-analysers were not involved in the original studies. Savage for example puts both sets of distance to good use not least because his analytical gaze extends beyond the literal content of the Mass Observation data he draws on, and because he uses an investigative eye to draw on other data sources to make his interpretations.

3.2 These kinds of analysis constitute a strong argument against the objection to data re-use that is based on the idea that adequate interpretation can only be made by those who were involved in the initial data generation. As Moore's analysis makes clear, if this view were taken seriously across the board the result would be a very a-historical sociology and I hardly need add that this is anathema to the idea of an investigative epistemology where one is hungrily seeking data and knowledge. But these analyses take us further than a simple dismantling of certain objections to data re-use, because they show that some forms of interpretation are *only possible from a distance.*

3.3 The idea that only those involved in initial data generation can understand the context enough to interpret the data is not only anti-historical but it puts enormous epistemological weight onto the notion of 'successful reflexivity', that is that researchers can be successfully and extensively reflexive, and that auto-reflexivity is a "'good' and 'progressive' thing" (Adkins, 2002: 345). Yet we know that researchers capacities for auto-reflexivity are limited and that the practice can sometimes be less politically progressive than might be assumed, with researchers able to depict themselves through their reflexivity as clever, enlightened and mobile, while fixing those whom they research as unreflexive, unenlightened and immobile (Skeggs, 2002; Adkins, 2002). Some researchers see the call to reflexivity as an opportunity to indulge a fascination with themselves, leading Skeggs to ask 'how it is that the earliest calls to examine power and responsibility have become calls to centre on the self' (Skeggs, 2002: 369). These kinds of critiques of auto-reflexivity are important for debates about qualitative data re-use, because although they do not imply that reflexive practices should be abandoned, they do question the idea that unique epistemological privilege be accorded to the (original) researchers' reflexive practices. If we acknowledge a more complex politics of reflexivity and interpretation, then it is not difficult to see the epistemological value in allowing for a range of reflexive interpretations of data, some from close range and some from a distance.

3.4 Silva's article provides a close range insider's account into processes of qualitative data production, and it demonstrates not only the complexities of auto-reflexivity but also how research, data, and knowledge are infused with the politics of reflexivity. As she puts it, 'reflexivity of research processes is generally not lacking. Actually, it is very much *because* of reflexivity that particular accounts are made of research processes'. She makes the point that choices about whether and how to be reflexive, and about what, are made in the political and socio-cultural contexts of academic life, and that includes struggles about 'what is included in the world the researcher conceives of', and 'what counts as evidence'. These she terms the ontological and the epistemological dramas. Her article is a piece of 're-use' or 're-analysis', in the sense that it involves her revisiting a project in which she was involved, but what it does is to track and to begin to

theorise about the links between these contexts of reflexivity, scientific practices and the 'findings' of that project.

Conclusion

4.1 My emphasis throughout this paper on the importance of an investigative and engaged approach is not a simple argument for instrumentality or pragmatism in a funding context where otherwise, qualitative research will lose ground and standing. However, in the context of epistemological and ontological struggles about how knowledge can be generated about the social world, and what that world looks like, I do consider it important that the proponents of qualitative approaches do not become fixated on highlighting what they see as their limitations (for example, by arguing that qualitative data cannot be 're-used'). The merits of an investigative epistemology are precisely that it involves curiosity and exploration, requiring that researchers be open to a range of data sources and methods, not all of which need to be 'qualitative' of course, whilst also being analytically critical about what the data they use can tell them about, and how they can do so.

Notes

[1]Three special editions of the journal FQS, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research, have been devoted to this debate. See FQS 2000, 2005a and 2005b.

References

ADKINS, L, (2002) 'Reflexivity and the Politics of Qualitative Research' in T. May (ed) *Qualitative Research in Action,* London: Blackwell

CORTI, L., Foster, J., and Thompson, P. (1995) 'Archiving Qualitative Research Data' *Social Research Update 10* http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU10.html

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (2005) *Strategic Plan 2005-2010*

FQS, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research (2005a), special edition on *Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data* , Vol. 6, No. 1, http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt1-05-e.htm

FQS, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research (2005b), special edition on *Qualitative Inquiry: Research, Archiving and Reuse* , Vol. 6, No. 2, http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt2-05-e.htm

FQS, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research (2000), special edition on *Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data,* Vol. 1, No. 3 http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt3-00-e.htm

HAMMERSLEY, M. (1997) 'Qualitative data archiving: Some Reflections on Its Prospects and Problems' *Sociology*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp: 131-142

HAMMERSLEY, M. (2004) 'Towards a Usable Past for Qualitative Research' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* Vol. 7, Nol. 1, pp:19-27

MAUTHNER, N. S., Parry, O., Backett-Milburn, K. (1998) 'The Data are out there, or are they? Implications for Archiving and Revisiting Qualitative Data' *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp: 733-745.

PARRY, O., and Mauthner, N. S. (2004) 'Whose data are they anyway? Practical, Legal and Ethical Issues in Archiving Qualitative Research Data', *Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp: 139-152

SKEGGS, B., (2002) 'Techniques for Telling the Reflexive Self' in T. May (ed) *Qualitative Research in Action*, London: Blackwell